Chapter 21
Stone And Shadow

You really are a creature of habit, aren't you?
Of course.
Blame me for your own poor planning.

You've made this process much more complicated than it needed to be.
But now your guards are all gone, and we are not far from the Caves.
I would be very foolish to squander this chance.
You certainly would.
But you can't overpower me.
Can't I?
You'll have to sleep sometime.
Granted.
But you're not going to try anything.
Oh?
Do you know where we were when you did that big show of power?
Why should I?
It's a city called Zuurith.
Decent weather and some nice local cuisine, but it's a bit totalitarian for my taste.
Ah, the riveting distractions your species indulges instead of doing its job.
And the Paladins have a large stronghold there.
Well, well.
That shut you up.
The entire city evacuated up the slopes with a fantastic view of the battlefield.
Most of them won't understand what they saw.
But the Paladins see their perennial nemesis in every wayward shadow.
They're certain to recognize you.
And I happened to make quite a scene at their Archive.
It won't take them long to realize I was the heroic mage defending their city-
-and I was the source of your garish display.

YOU-!
Look at this mess. You have all the subtlety of a rock to the face.
If you carry on like this, I won't last a sef.
You nearly got my friends killed today.
Clearly, I've let you get too comfortable.
So here's how things are going to work from now on.
I've surrounded us with your enemies, and you can't hide in my shadow anymore.
If you make it a fight, you know they'll kill me.
Now, either I've just become worthless to you, and you'll simply wait to ensnare the next elemental mage instead-
-or you think you can eventually find a way out of this.
If I'm still too valuable for you to cut your losses-
-then if you're smart, you'll tuck yourself away in whatever dark corner of my soul you find most comfortable, and let ME convince your enemies that I'm more valuable to them alive.
And I know how good you are at playing long games.

You think you're very clever.
Oh, you noticed.
But this scheme is not unbreakable.
Her servants have had mere hours to mobilize after us.
I could simply kill your allies now and slip away before they begin their search.
No. You can't.
And you won't.
You couldn't kill Dainix, no matter how much you wanted to.
Given time-
He'd have torn me apart.
And I'm not sure it's even POSSIBLE to kill Alinva.
Besides, you want them alive. All of them.
And why would I want that?
Because they know about you, and they STILL protect me.
You're very lucky to have them.
They are going to be your only protection when the Paladins start hunting me down.
You seem to think you can blast every problem with overwhelming force and win automatically.
You have no experience being weak or needing help.
Protection! I have no need of-
Yes you do, you ridiculous egotist!
You made that sacrifice when you pinned all your hopes on my continued survival!
Unless you want your ego to get me killed, sit down, shut up and defer to my expertise.

Well?
So you're no longer willing to die to foil my plans.
Heheh.
Good.
I knew your selfishness would serve me well.
Until next time.
And stay out.

Well, the good news is-
it IS healing pretty fast.
That implies bad news.
It's been broken twice in one day. You're lucky it's still on your shoulder.
The bone's callused already, but the muscle is still inflamed, and it could easily break again.
I'd recommend splinting it, but-
Keeping you alive is hard enough with BOTH hands!
Right.
Still, we can't just leave it.
A break like this would normally take about seven sefs to heal.
It'll be back to normal in one.
That's good, but still more time than we have.
You should've talked to Alinva.
...No.
What?
I couldn't do a damn thing in that fight.
That - that's not true.
And it doesn't mean you don't deserve help-
It's not about deserving!
I know what I am, and I can't DO what you all can do!
But I CAN take the hits.
So nobody else has to.
And if Alinva has to worry about me too-
-then I'm just a liability.

I am positive that's not how they see you.
That's not my problem.
SOMEONE has to be tactical about this.
Well, right now, our survival strongly depends on you being awake, healthy and functional in a fight.
So, tactically speaking, I need you to be completely honest with me about how you're feeling and how I can help you.
You know.
For tactical reasons.
SNEAK
All right, you got me.
Yup.
So?
The good news is there's no risk of infection. That's one thing I can't heal quickly.
But I picked up a lot of small fractures keeping the mountain from falling on Alinva-
-and a lot of those got worse when Erin blew me up.
Some of them have had time to heal, but falling down here and getting smashed into a crater didn't do me any favors overall.
The big problem right now is speed. While the deep damage is healing, the muscles will be stiff and sore.
That means I'm not as fast or as flexible right now as I'd like to be.
That also means smaller hits might keep me down longer than they should.
This isn't a state I like having to fight in.
But on the plus side, I'm not sick, poisoned or concussed-
-so I should still be able to push through the worst of it.

What's that look?
For someone so reluctant to get medical attention, you seem to have needed a lot of it.
Well, duh.
You really don't know what it's like out there for people like me?
Sorry. Before I was exiled, I'd never met any ferin.
Oh, it's great. You make so many friends.
Hunters, monsters, villagers with pitchforks who think you ate their sheep-
-the wild chimeras that ACTUALLY ate their sheep-
-AUGH! What IS that?!
Wh- this?
It's voraol ointment. Good for inflammation.
The smell's good. It means it's still potent.
"Potent" is right.
That's ANOTHER great thing about being a ferin - everything smells terrible all the time.
Everyone is SO sweaty and nobody ever notices.
And perfume's even WORSE!
I can imagine.
You really can't!
You know...
...when I was a kid, I didn't like who I was either.
My parents asked if it was because there were things I wanted to do that I couldn't if I was a girl, but that wasn't it.
It wasn't about wanting to be something else. I just... was.
So... we changed a few things. And I was a lot happier.
The way you talk about being a Ferin... it just sounds a little familiar, that's all.
Do you think you'd be happier if you could be something else?

I... I don't know.
There are things about it that are really terrible, but...
...it's mostly things that have been DONE to me about it.
Kendal asked me something like that when we first met.
Really?
Yeah.
I had this... dumb plan.
It doesn't matter.
But he asked if I wanted to change, or if I just didn't want to be alone.
It's hard to separate them.
But...
I've thought about it less since I met them.
That might mean something.
Also, speaking purely selfishly, right now I'm very glad you can jump fifty feet and see in the dark.
Oh yeah. That part kicks ass.
It might.
I'm glad it sounds like you're happier now.
I don't know how the rest of you manage, stuck on the ground all the time.
Although right now I'd trade out the nose in a heartbeat.
I swear it's getting more disgusting.
You must be a joy to cook for.
No, it's -
...
...it's something else-

What's wrong?
Idiot.
It said it was starving.
Focus. Talk to me.
What's coming?
Th-the thing that wanted to eat you?
Cooking that bug just lured it right to us.
And it's not alone.

What do they look like?
Stretched-out sick people. Really nasty claws.
Sounds like cave-crawlers.
I know the theory, but I've never fought one before. None of them ever made it through the desert.
Have you-?
You have.
Okay.
They're opportunistic and motivated only by hunger.
Maybe they'll go after the bug and leave us alone.
You can't seriously believe we'll get that lucky.
I've been pleasantly surprised before.
GAH!
WHACK!

CRACK
hisssssssss
CRACK
WHAT?!
CLICK
please
WHAT are you DOING?!
THWACK

SLAM
It -
- they -
CRACK!
- they're PEOPLE!
NOT ANYMORE!
CRUNCH!
SNAG
CLOSE YOUR EYES!
FIZZZT!

We've got an exit!
Come on!

CRACK
CRUNCH
WHACK
Falst!
Over here!
FALST!
CRACK

SLASH
STAGGER

WHIP
SMASH
FIZZT
THUMP
Sorry!
Brace yourself!
unh-
FLASH
THUD!

I know! I know! I'm sorry!
Just hang on!
HSSSSSSS
SHH
FWOOM!
FWOOSH
Hk-!
n-not yet-
...Come on.
THUD
Almost there!

...th-the fire...
I- I think I overdid it.
I nearly burned out again.
...and you gave me grief... about the arm...
Don't start!
I wouldn't have risked it if you hadn't gone berserk!
GAAH!
Why didn't you go for the door?!
GASH
...I...
I didn't...
THUD

GRAB
WHIP
SKSH
WHUD
N-no fire left... to block the door, right?
Maybe I can-
No.
My fault.
I'll get it.
SLICE

CRICK
CRACK
CRICK
That did it!
It's coming down!
WHOOP
CRRRRRRR

RRUMBLE...
Something's wrong.

Alinva! How are you-?
Things are moving underground.
Where are Falst and Dainix?
I'm glad you brought that up.
I don't know.
It's been hours. They should be back!
I know.
I didn't want to leave you and Kendal inadequately guarded.
Now that you're awake, I suggest we go look for them.
Tess-
Don't worry. I'll keep an eye on your buddy.
Thank you.
I've stabilized him, but he's still unconscious.
If he wakes up while we're gone-
Well, please don't let him do anything stupid.
Stupid by my standards or yours?
Stupid by my mother's standards.
Smart.
He'll live longer.

Do you still have your pair for my wind lacrima?
Nah, sorry. It got busted during a disagreement with a storm drake.
Of course it did.
Let me find a replacement. Call us if anything happens.
With luck we won't be long, but don't leave Kendal unguarded to come after us.
Don't give me a reason to, then.
We won't be-
Alinva?
There's so much we don't know about him.
Sometimes he seems so happy, it's easy to forget...
He named himself after the sword. Did you know that?
When do you think he realized he could save Vash whenever he wanted?
How long could he bear to wait?
I can't trust him with the sword now. I CAN'T.
But...
...we know it's connected to him somehow.
What if he needs it to find his way back?

Leave the sword.
I won't let him do anything dumb with it.
Tess.
I ALSO will not do anything dumb with it.
Correct.
Send to Falst. Message follows.
We're following this spellbird to your location.
...Hang in there.
Message ends.
Come back safe.

SNAKT!

Please don't explode, please don't explode, please don't-
A sealed door-
-means no monsters on the other side!

GRRIND
THUMP
Sorry, you're going to hate this.
CLATTER
-but you said an infection was the worst case scenario.
POP
Kitridine smells terrible and feels worse-

One, two, three...
SSSSS
SSSSS
NO
ACK
AHHHH
Breathe!
It won't sting long!
gh-
GWAHH!!
CHIRP

CAST
CAST
Can you... hold this for me...?
I need a minute.
MP

SSSSS
I'm sorry.
No, it... it's not your fault.
I left you fighting alone.
I just couldn't... I didn't...
The Ravvan hunt monsters.
It's how we protect the people.
And until recently, I...
I never had trouble drawing a line between them.
In the arena, that line was all I had left to hold onto.
I was alone, exiled and imprisoned - I was a Demon with no idea what that meant - but I was still Ravvan. I wasn't a murderer.
The more they pushed me to kill, the more sure I was that I couldn't let them take the one part of myself I still recognized.
But none of that mattered in the end.
I let you suffer for my principles, and I forgot them the second I was the one bleeding for them.

WHAM
Falst-!
Th- there IS no line.
And even if there was-
-what you killed was already dead.
How can you accept that?

SKIN
I was... really little when my mom got sick.
When she couldn't get out of bed anymore, my dad left to find medicine or healers or... something.
I gave her food, water, but she... she got worse and worse.
Slept more and more.
She'd, uh...
...she'd sing to me, though.
When she got worse, she'd still hum.
After three days silent...
...she got up.

It wasn't her anymore.
It wasn't her fault.
I got away and hid up in the rafters.
She... she wasn't a ferin. She couldn't climb like my dad and I could, even after the change.
She never even tried the door. I think she stayed because she could still smell me.
She knew there was still something she could eat.
I was up there for so long. I got so hungry...
First time I can remember hating these.
...the only thing I could think was I was so scared I would change like she did.
Like I was halfway there already.
I still thought maybe she was just sick -
- maybe my dad could still make her better -
- but he had to know she was already gone.
Or he couldn't have killed her.

That's how I know.
Falst... that's-
POK
Hold it up to your shoulder and concentrate.
Wait - what? I-
Just think at it. Nothing fancy.
"Think at it?"
Fine, but can we talk about the-?
AH!
What-?!
Nice. Wasn't sure I remembered that one.
Falst! What-?!
Not all these lacrimas have lost their charge.
And I've had a little practice spell-carving.
That's not my question!
You are so much more injured than I am!
And you - you TRICKED me!
Why would you make me use this first?!
My fault.
My job to fix it.
And I already know you're not tactical about how I heal.

There's still a glow.
Use it to close the wound.
Don't need it.
Falst, I SWEAR to Jiya-
No, really!
Surface stuff closes up pretty fast.
That's incredible.
Only if you can get it clean before it closes over.
And it's not much fun if the weapon's still in there either.
Oh.
I don't want to say this, but-
I know.
This hidey-hole's a little TOO good.
The air's getting stale.
We have to move.

Falst...
We've gone down a long way from where we came in.
I don't think they'd build the exit this far down.
There...
...there might not be a way out.
SMASH
If you're waiting to die, you're already dead.
Let's get out of here.